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Author(s): Louis Owens


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Reconsideration:
“Grampa Killed Indians, Pa Killed Snakes”:
Steinbeck and the American Indian

Louis Owens
University of New Mexico

Given the two-fold concern that runs through John Steinbeck’s fiction from beginning to end — both for the so-called American Myth and for a kind of transcendent, intuitive sense of oneness with what Steinbeck and Edward F. Ricketts in The Log from the Sea of Cortez called “the whole thing, known and unknowable” — it was inevitable that Steinbeck would write about the American Indian. In an excellent essay calling our attention to the little-noted presence of the Indian in Steinbeck’s fiction, Carroll Britch and Clifford Lewis have pointed out that the Native American in Steinbeck’s writing is “conjured up from some other world, timeless as memory, and borne as in a dream” (39). Looking closely at such works as The Pearl, “Flight,” Viva Zapata!, The Wayward Bus, and Tortilla Flat, these critics focus primarily upon the Indian of Mexico, such as Juana and Kino of The Pearl, Zapata himself or, more often, the character of mestizo (Hispanic and Indian mixedblood) heritage present in many Steinbeck works.

Britch and Lewis trace persuasively the presence of the romantic Indian figure in Steinbeck’s fiction, the Native American who rises like a wraith “from all those of romantic disposition who yearn for something mysterious and magnificent to think upon and dream about.” “It is,” suggest these critics, “a passionate dream of personal integrity, of courage, and of spirituality” (56). It is also, I would add, a dream that diminishes the American Indian throughout Steinbeck’s fiction, a dream that remains the exclusive property of the white dreamer while excluding the Indian — in a recognizably American pattern — from any meaningful existence in the real world Steinbeck chronicles so effectively.

It is undeniable that an abstract, romantic, and somewhat clichéd concept of “Indianness” permeates Steinbeck’s writing, from Cup of Gold, his first novel, through nearly all of his major works. Perhaps the best example of what Steinbeck defined as ‘Indian’ can be found...
in *The Pearl*, the author’s 1947 novella portraying a conflict between an Indian community and the more sophisticated and shrewd world of Spanish Mexico. As Indians, Kino and Juana in *The Pearl* represent for Steinbeck a kind of profound and intuitive connection with the natural world. From the novel’s opening line, “Kino awakened in the near dark,” until their tragic encounters with death in the dark mountains, Kino and Juana operate in a kind of prelapsarian state of unenlightened innocence, functioning primarily on the level of the unconscious as the primal pair in the timeless, unfallen world of their garden village. We are told in the opening paragraphs, for example, that the couple awakens to “a morning like other mornings and yet perfect among mornings.”

In this version of what we might call mythic naturalism, faced with the inexorable forces of civilization, the simplicity and naïveté of the Indian protagonists nearly destroy them. While Kino and Juana, Steinbeck’s Indian Adam and Eve, may have indeed fallen into full knowledge by the end of the story, they have simultaneously lost both their child, Coyotito — and thus the promise of a future — and the security of their Eden-like village. And while they appear to have achieved heroic stature through their tragic fall into knowledge, their roles as mythic figures deny them the dimensions of fully realized, psychologically complex characters. For Steinbeck, these Mexican Indians are purely symbols, walking shadows illustrating the kind of intuitive, non-rational state he and Ricketts celebrate in the Indians described in *The Log from the Sea of Cortez*:

They seem to live on remembered things, to be so related to the seashore and the rocky hills and the loneliness that they are these things. To ask about the country is like asking about themselves. “How many toes have you?” “What toes? Let’s see — of course, ten. I have known them all my life, I never thought to count them. Of course it will rain tonight, I don’t know why. Something in me tells me I will rain tonight. Of course, I am the whole thing, now that I think about it. I ought to know when I will rain.” (75)

The picture painted is a narrowly romantic one, a portrait of simple people in a simple, uncomplicated world. Similarly, Juanito in *To a God Unknown*, Pepé Torres in “Flight,” Danny in *Tortilla Flat*, Juan Chicoy in *The Wayward Bus*, and old Gitano in “The Great Mountain” are, among other Steinbeck characters, of mestizo or mixed-blood heritage, and the traces of Indian blood Steinbeck injects into these characters signify only one thing: a more profoundly intuitive nature. The Indian, Steinbeck seems to suggest, exists on a less rational, more harmoniously intuitive basis than does his Anglo-European counterpart. When this element is passed on to the mixed-
blood, the result is both a deeply mystical response to the natural world and a conflict between rational and non-rational selves. The effect is a kind of dreamy celebration in Steinbeck’s stories and novels of a romantic element definable as “Indianness” along with a sense of, as Britch and Lewis point out, a familiar pattern of inexorable doom for the Indian (45). When, for example, Danny, the paisano protagonist of Tortilla Flat, wanders down to stare off the pier “into the deep, deep water,” he is staring into the dark depths of his unconscious. In the end the “primitive,” Indian self that would lead Danny back toward the forest and the simple life is embattled with the European self that would urge him toward the civilized world. Danny’s conscious and unconscious selves are in conflict, and that conflict destroys him.

Most often, Steinbeck chose to deal with flesh-and-blood “Indianness” in the form of the Mexican or Mexican-American, and in this somewhat remote, exotic form, for Steinbeck the Indian need not actually be dealt with as anything more than an impulse, a shadowy presence. On the other hand, when he chose to notice the North American Indian, Steinbeck shifted ground considerably. The Indian presence. On the other hand, when he chose to notice the North American Indian, Steinbeck shifted ground considerably. The Indian

The North American Indian, however, tens of thousands of whom lived in Steinbeck’s California during his lifetime and live there still, exists in Steinbeck’s fiction purely as an index to the American myth, never emerging from the shadow of America’s mythic foundations. This Native American serves as an index to America’s collective culpability while remaining at the same time trapped in the realm of cliché and stereotype.

This version of the Steinbeck Indian is introduced in The Grapes of Wrath when the faceless representative sharecropper declares in one of the interchapters, “Grampa took up the land, and he had to kill the Indians and drive them away. And Pa was born here, and he killed weeds and snakes.” As if to underscore his point, Steinbeck adds: “The tenants cried, Grampa killed Indians, Pa killed snakes for the land” (45-46). What Steinbeck is reminding us of here is the consciousness upon which America was founded.

From the first colonial writings, the Pilgrims and Puritans saw themselves quite consciously as the chosen people, the new Israelites, led by the new Moses, sent to reclaim this new promised land from Satan. The Garden of the New World would be redeemed by the Army of Christ. In such a holy war, the end justified any means as long as the Serpent in the wilderness garden and his servants, the Indians, were removed (or, as could sometimes happen, spiritually redeemed) in the end. It is Nathaniel Hawthorne’s consciousness
of this train of Puritan thought that underlies the ominous Indian "pow-wows" in "Young Goodman Brown," and it is as a reminder of this holy war that Herman Melville names his Calvinist captain's ship the Pequod in Moby Dick, reminding us subtly of the Puritans' slaughter of the Pequot villagers.

In The Grapes of Wrath, the Indian is of significance as a symbol of the destructive consciousness underlying American settlement and the westering pattern, that would lead ultimately to the catastrophe of the Dust Bowl and the final removal to California, the last possible Eden. In this, Steinbeck's greatest novel, the Indian has mythic dimension but no further reality. When, late in The Grapes of Wrath, the migrants gather in the evenings, Steinbeck writes: "The story tellers, gathering attention into their tales, spoke in great rhythms, spoke in great words because the tales were great, and the listeners became great through them" (445). Here, in this romantic, epic tradition, one story teller recalls Indian fighting on the frontier:

They was a brave on a ridge, against the sun... Spread his arms an' stood. Naked as morning, an' against the sun... Stood there, arms spread out; like a cross he looked... An' the men — well, they raised their sights an' they felt the wind with their fingers; an' then they jus' lay there an' couldn' shoot. Maybe that Injun knowed somepin... An' I laid my sights on his belly, 'cause you can't stop a Injun no other place — an' — then. Well, he jest plunked down an' rolled. An' he wasn' big — he'd looked so grand — up there. All tore to pieces an' little. Ever see a cock pheasant, stiff and beautiful, ever' feather drewed an' painted, an' even his eyes drewed in pretty? An' bang! You pick him up — bloody an' twisted, an' you spoiled somepin better'n you... you spoiled somepin in yaself, an' you can't never fix it up. (445)

Here, naked against the sun, with arms raised in Christ-like cruciform, the Indian as symbol cuts to the heart of the idea America has of itself. In the wilderness — Cooper's temple of nature or Thoreau's Walden — we may come closest to an unmediated spirituality, to that "part and particle of God" within the isolated self. The Indian, elemental, immersed in the fertile heart of the American wilderness garden, stands for that potential which Americans have sought for more than three centuries. In this portrait the Indian shadows something within the American consciousness, but beyond this he has no existence and, for all the heroic grandeur of the description, he has no more human dimension than does a pheasant. In attempting to destroy the Indian, Steinbeck suggests, Americans damaged if not destroyed that element within themselves which connected them with the earth, the intuitive self.
At the story’s end, the migrants reflect on the storyteller’s picture: “Against the sun, with his arms out. An’ he looked big — as God.” As long as the Indian remains an abstraction — something intuitive Americans kill within themselves — the much uglier reality of the genocidal slaughter and oppression of real human beings can be kept at a distance. And Steinbeck does this. The migrants — and Steinbeck’s reader — can feel the loss of a connection with something “big” — as big as God, or nature — but in the end they mourn for their own loss or diminishment, not for the actual people killed or driven from the land. Steinbeck is simply not interested in that reality. Although Britch and Lewis suggest that “Steinbeck has managed to reveal Indian suffering without indicting the white majority as in any willful way the cause of it” (57), I would argue rather that the subject of Indian suffering has been so diminished as to almost disappear behind the passage’s profound concern for what “Indian” symbolizes within the white audience.

*The Grapes of Wrath* is an unmistakable jeremiad, Steinbeck’s warning that America got off on the wrong foot and had better learn new ways of inhabiting the continent rapidly being destroyed. The Dust Bowl is of immediate concern in the novel, of course, but Steinbeck makes it abundantly clear that the Dust Bowl is merely one result of a destructive pattern of thought that begins with the Puritan need to identify with Old Testament myths. By finding a convenient place for the Indian in this Old Testament pattern, the conquering colonist found it easy to kill Indian and serpent alike, tainting their new-found Eden in the process of reclaiming it. The Indian as pure idea is Steinbeck’s reminder of where America began to go wrong. The Indian as a real, twentieth-century figure — unlike Steinbeck’s migrants, fishermen, paisanos, store clerks, and other characters — has little relevance, however.

Given geographical realities, it was inevitable that a large number of Native Americans would come west with the Dust Bowl migration from Oklahoma — from the region once set aside as “Indian Territory” — and Steinbeck acknowledges this fact in *The Grapes of Wrath* in the form of two Cherokees. When the migrants celebrate a moment of security with the pleasures of a square dance, and Steinbeck’s chameleon prose rises brilliantly to the occasion, it is a “Cherokee girl” among the conservative migrant women who abandons herself in a pagan frenzy to the music: “Look at her pant, look at her heave,” Steinbeck writes, going on to describe the “Texas boy and the Cherokee girl, pantin’ like dogs an’ a-beatin’ the groun’” (449).

And when the guardians of the Weedpatch labor camp need someone with unusually keen senses to watch the gate during a dance, they choose Jule, a half-Cherokee mixedblood. Never one to mince
words, Tom Joad notes “the hawk nose and high brown cheek bones and the slender receding chin” and says, “They says you’re half Injun. You look all Injun to me.” Jule replies, “Jes’ half. Wisht I was a full-blood. I’d have my lan’ on the reservation. Them full-bloods got it pretty nice, some of ’em” (463-64).

In spite of his fascination with the mysterious quality of “Indian-ness” throughout his writing, nowhere in Steinbeck’s fiction does the presence of a real Native American, a flesh-and-blood Indian existing in the present-day world with all its complexities, come so clearly to life as in this scene. Here, for an instant in Steinbeck’s work, a present-day North American Indian is made to share in the real difficulties of American life. The Indian, for a brief moment, steps out of the world of shadow and into the mundane light of reality. It is somewhat unfortunate, however, that Steinbeck, a writer who took extreme pains to be factual and correct in his details, did not bother to learn more about his subject in this case. Either Jule is unusually ignorant of both his rights and the current status of Cherokee tribal lands or, as is more likely, Steinbeck is uninformed. It seems that Steinbeck was not aware of the realities of the 1887 Allotment Act which divided tribal land holdings and eventually transferred more than 90 million acres from Indian to white control. Under the terms of this act anyone such as Jule who was half Cherokee would have been just as likely as a fullblood to have had his allotted acres on what had long since ceased to be reservation land, unless that land had been lost by his family before him.

But what is important here is not Steinbeck’s factual haziness but that, once again, the Indian enters Steinbeck’s fiction as an idea, a cliché: when the square dance begins to approach the level of a primal ritual with intensely sexual overtones, the female of choice is an Indian — the white man’s guide throughout American literature into the primeval forests of the unconscious; when extrasensory perception — a “Hawkeye” — is needed, the choice is also an Indian.

In his other vast book about the American myth, East of Eden, Steinbeck again invokes the Indian as idea and self-reflection for Americans. Of the native inhabitants of his part of northern California, Steinbeck writes grimly:

First there were Indians, an inferior breed without energy, inventiveness, or culture, a people that lived on grubs and grasshoppers and shellfish, too lazy to hunt or fish. They ate what they could pick up and planted nothing. They pounded bitter acorns for flour. Even their warfare was a weary pantomime. (6)

We can give Steinbeck a large benefit of doubt here and assume that
the narrative consciousness of the novel, which will develop and change greatly in the course of the novel, is parroting at this moment the kind of insensitive, blind ethnic chauvinism necessary in the original settlers who would displace and kill the Indians. From such a perspective the voice mimics the national consciousness which justified injustices to Indian people by diminishing the worth of those people.

Of the “Indian fighting” in the late 19th century West, Steinbeck writes in this novel: “...the tribes were forced into revolt, driven and decimated, and the sad, sullen remnants settled on starvation lands. It was not nice work but, given the pattern of the country’s development, it had to be done” (39). Here Steinbeck’s aim is to place Adam Trask — East of Eden’s protagonist — squarely within this cruel and destructive pattern. Though Adam refuses to kill Indians, he nonetheless serves his time in the Indian campaigns and is thus caught up fully in the westering pattern of American settlement.

With his dry declaration, Steinbeck is mimicking once again that consciousness which rationalized the injustices of the pattern, and here again the Indian serves merely as an index to Adam’s American-ness. Steinbeck must make his character representative of America itself, the so-called American Adam. To do so he must place Adam securely within the westering pattern of American expansion, a pattern which requires displacement and decimation of the Indian. In the course of the novel Steinbeck will condemn Adam for his fatal blindness. In holding to the myth of America as the new Eden and himself as an innocent reinhabiting the new-found garden, Adam brings about his own destruction and damages the lives of those around him.

Adam represents the profound American need to believe in reclaimed innocence, in starting over in the new Eden. Again, in East of Eden Steinbeck uses the Indian as an index to America’s blindness and self-destructiveness, and again — despite the acknowledgment of injustices — Steinbeck’s Indians have far less reality than do Fenimore Cooper’s. As in most American literature, the Indian remains for Steinbeck merely an abstraction, an “Injun Joe” mirror reflecting back at America its own fantasies and its own guilt. The real Indian is finally subsumed through the vehicle of literature into the self-consciousness of white America, becoming that America’s shadow and ceasing to exist in his own right.

That this transformation should take place within Steinbeck’s fiction should be no surprise, for surely Steinbeck is the most quintessentially American of writers. Nonetheless, for the writer who so brilliantly drew America’s attention to the plight of the marginal and
the dispossessed — Dust Bowl refugees, migrant laborers, drifters, social outcasts, and “paisanos” — the disappearing act must be, for many, a significant disappointment.

Works Cited